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Balancing people's livelihood and conservation aims: the Nechisar National Park in southern Ethiopia

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Nechisar National Park

Set along Lake Chamo and Lake Abaya in Ethiopia's southern Rift Valley, Nechisar National Park is renowned for its stunning landscape and wildlife. Vegetation varies from dense evergreen forest where groundwater oozes out at the base of the escarpment, over shrub and woodland on the rocky hills and mountain slopes, to the vast grasslands on the Nechisar plains. The park is home to large mammals such as zebra, grant gazelles, kudu and the endangered Swayne's hartebeest. Lion, leopard and spotted hyena are still present, but being wary of people are seldom seen (Clark, 2010). The park is of great economic importance. On the one hand, by conserving the wildlife and the landscape, the park attracts national and international tourists. On the other hand, the natural resources in the park are important for people's livelihood.

People's livelihoods

Have competing demands, fisheries, livestock production, agriculture and nature conservation pose challenges for nature conservation and tourism development. Identifying sustainable livelihood strategies for people living in and around the park is therefore crucial.

Fishing and firewood collection give direct monetary return to people linked to the urban economy. Fishing is done by men with women benefiting indirectly from it; firewood is collected by women, mostly widows or divorcees living in town. Both Guji people, pastoralists, and Kore people, agriculturalists, claim to be the first occupants of the area. Naturally people resent abandoning the land to which they have long standing attachment to. One Guji lady said:

If we would have to move to another place our cattle and even we ourselves would not be able to survive. Because we wouldn't be familiar with the climate, nor would we know what to live from and even our cattle would not find the right grasses. Just as our ancestors looked after this place, we as well as our children have to protect the area. If the area is well looked after there will be enough water, the grasses will be good, the cattle will thrive and so will we. Today, without the park, we would loose ourselves.

Striking a balance

Both pastoralists and farmers have for thousands of years shaped the east African savannas. Under the right conditions savannas can be more productive where wildlife, livestock and people are mixed (Reid, 2012). The challenge for Nechisar National Park is to strike the right balance, such that nature conservation and ecotourism complement local people's livelihoods.

References

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